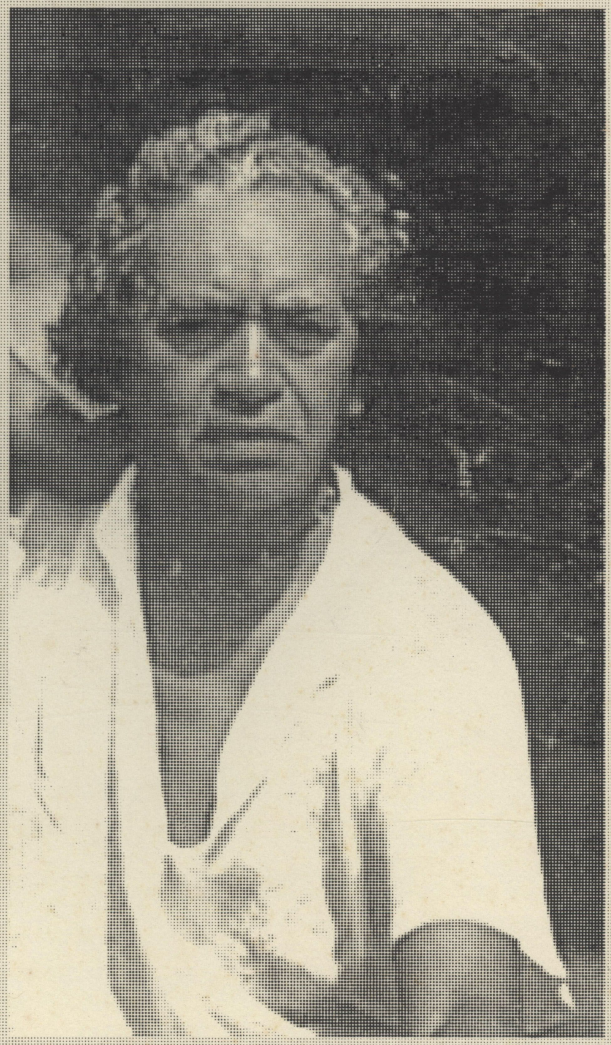
'Sigo em Forma de Palavra',
'I go on Shaped like a Word'



1951

1996

45 Years of Creativity

A Tribute to Thiago de Mello
Um Tributo a Thiago de Mello
Un Tributo a Thiago de Mello

que transpira o tributo à abençoada filha de Borreirinha, minha amiga Socorro Dotra, no final do ano do seu luminoso triunfo. Com o afeto e o respeito do Thiago de Mello

Sponsored by the Center for Amazonian Literature & Culture

Thiago de Mello

Thiago de Mello, born in 1926 in the state of Amazonas, Brazil, is the most representative and celebrated poet of Amazonia. Presently, he is Minister of Culture of the State of Amazonas and has served, on many occasions, in important diplomatic posts in several countries, including Chile and Bolivia.

His literary career began in 1951 with the publication of his book *Silêncio e Palavra* (*Silence and Word*). Since then, his whirlwind and wondrous creativity has continued unabated. The collection *Vento Geral* gathers a dozen books published until 1981.

His poetic voice has been translated into many languages including English, Spanish, French, and German. In 1970, in the United States, Geo Pflaum Publisher published a selection of his poems entitled *What Counts is Life*. His work was translated into Spanish by Thiago de Mello's close friend, Pablo Neruda, and by Mario Benedetti.

Thiago de Mello ~ in his essays, poems, and in his social and political activism ~ has always been a passionate defender of his native region, and has exalted it as a key ecological reserve for all humanity.

From *Amazonas, Land of Water*
Thiago de Mello

Como os caboclos empurram um batelão
que dormiu atracado na beira da várzea
e amanheecu encalhado
porque de noite as águas desceram demais,
assim nós te empurramos para o futuro,
encalhada Amazônia,
pelos pântanos da nossa indiferença,
sobre os cedros balofos da retórica
que mal nos ajudava a te esquecer.

Te guardávamos para um futuro
encoberto pela cerração da friagem,
como se as raízes de tuas árvores,
o canto de teus pássaros noturnos,
o sonho mineral do teu chão,
os mananciais de tuas águas,
estivissem estagnados, defendidos
no cerne de uma abstração do tempo.

Como quem se desvia
da caranguejeira peluda,
como quem bota de lado
o paneiro que incomoda,
como quem afasta os olhos
da coruja que te espia,
como quem deixa para depois,
um dia quando,
o plantio dificil de ser feito
e faz de conta que o rangido
na cumeeira rachada
é só o vento,
ora é o vento e nada mais
—— assim te deixamos encalhada
nos limos apodrecidos do descaso
à espera de que o acaso
de uma enchente imaginária
te fizesse flutuar
ao encontro do teu rumo esquecido,
perdido na fundura das águas.

Like the river people at dawn pushing off a boat
left aground by night's receding waters,
we will set you free, our stranded Amazon,
push you through the swamp of our indifference,
the spongy cedars of rhetoric,
which still didn't help us forget.

We were keeping you for some future time,
concealed behind a curtain of fog
as if the roots of your trees,
the song of your birds at night,
the glimmering dream of your mineral bed
and the wellspring of your waters
had all gone foul, walled up
in a hollow stump away from time.

Like someone who ignores the bad-omen spider
or tosses aside the heavy burden
or avoids the stare of the owl
or leaves today's plantings for tomorrow,
and pretends the creaking in the ridgepole
is only the wind,
just a little wind, that's all-
so we left you stranded
in the rotten ooze of our uncaring,
hoping that by chance
some miracle flood
would set you free
to find your forgotten course
lost deep in the layers of your flow.

-translated from the Portuguese by Charles Cutler

Vem comigo, é claro o tempo
e sopra o vento geral.
Vamos devagar, remando,
na água negra trasparente,
tomando todo cuidado
para que a proa do casco
não vinque a fímbria da luz.
Vem comigo descobrir
as fontes verdes da vida.
Mas contigo traz amor,
para com dor aprender.

Come with me, the weather's fine
and a worldwind is blowing.
Let us go slowly rowing
through the clear black water,
taking every caution
that the ship's prow
does not sever the fringe of light.
Come with me to discover
the true sources of life.
But bring love with you,
so that through pain you might learn.

Eu venho desse reino generoso,
onde os homens que nascem dos seus verdes
continuam cativos esquecidos
e contudo profundamente irmãos
das coisas poderosas, permanentes
como as águas, os ventos e a esperança.
Vam ver comigo o rio e as suas leis.
Vem aprender a ciência dos rebojos,
vem escutar os cânticos noturnos
no mágico silêncio do igapó
coberto por estrelas de esmeralda.

I hail from that generous kingdom
where the men who are born of its verdure
carry on as forsaken captives,
and still and all, stay closest kin
to powerful things, to permanent things
like wind, water, hope.
Come, see with me the river and its laws.
Come, learn the arts of swirling froth,
come, listen to the nighttime hymns
in the magic silence of the floodplains,
all shrouded overhead in emerald stars.

Filho da floresta, água e madeira
vão na luz dos meus olhos,
e explicam este jeito meu de amar as estrelas
e de carregar nos ombros a esperança.
Um lanho injusto, lama na madeira,
a água forte de infância chega e lava.
Me fiz gente no meio de madeira,
as achas encharcadas, lenha verde,
minha mãe reclamava da fumaça.
Na verdade abri os olhos vendo madeira,
o belo madeirame de itaúba
da casa do meu avô no Bom Socorro,
onde meu pai nasceu
e onde eu também nasci.

Fui o último a ver a casa erguida ainda,
íntegros os esteios se inclinavam,
morada de morcegos e cupins.
Até que desabada pelas águas de muitas cheias,
a casa se afogou
num silencio de limo, folhas, telhas.

Mas a casa só morreu definitivamente
quando ruíram os esteios da memória
de meu pai,
neste verão dos seus noventa anos.
Durante mais de meio século,
sem voltar ao lugar onde nasceu,
a casa permaneceu erguida em sua lembrança,
as janelas abertas para as manhãs
do Paraná do Ramos,
a escada de pau-d'arco
que ele continuava a descer
para pisar o capim orvalhado
e caminhar correndo
pelo campo geral coberto de mungubeiras
até a beira florida do Lago Grande
onde as mãos adolescentes aprendiam
os segredos dos úberes das vacas.

Para onde ia, meu pai levava a casa
e levava a rede armada entre acariquaras,
onde, embalados pela surdina dos carapanãs,
ele e minha mãe se abraçavam,
cobertos por um céu insuportavelmente
estrelado.

Uma noite, nós dois sozinhos,
num silêncio hoje quase impossível
nos modernos frangalhos de Manaus,
meu pai me perguntou se eu me lembrava
de um barulho no mato que ele ouviu
de manhãzinha clara ele chegando
no Bom Socorro aceso na memória,
depois de muito remo e tantas águas.
Nada lhe respondi. Fiquei ouvindo
meu pai avançar entre as mangueiras
na direção daquele baque, aquele
baque seco de ferro, aquele canto
de ferro na madeira — era a tua mãe,
os cabelos no sol, era a Maria,
o machado brandinho e abrindo em achas
um pau mulato azul, duro de bronze,
batida pelo vento, ela sozinha
no meio da floresta.

Todas essas coisas ressurgiam
e de repente lhe sumiam na memória,
enquanto a casa ruína se fazia
no abandono voraz, capim-agulha,
e o antigo cacaual desenganado
dava seu fruto ao grito dos macacos
e aos papagaios pândegos de sol.

Enquanto minha avó Safira, solitária,
última habitante real da casa,
acordava de madrugada para esperar
uma canoa que não chegaria nunca mais.
Safira pedra das águas,
que me dava a bênção como
quem joga o anzol pra puxar
um jaraqui na poronga,
sempre vestida de escuro
a voz rouca disfarçando
uma ternura de estrelas
no amanhecer do Andirá.
Filho da floresta, água e madeira,
voltei para ajudar na construção
do morada futura. Raça de âmagos,
um dia chegarão as proas claras
para os verdes livrar da servidão.

Son of the jungle, water and wood
come in the light of my eyes,
and explain this way I have of loving stars
and of carrying this cross of hope.
An unkind cut disgraces the wood,
the powerful water of childhood arrives, cleanses.
I came of age amidst the wood,
the soaked logs, unseasoned wood,
my mother complained of the smoke.
I actually opened my eyes and saw wood,
the beautiful laurel woodwork
in my grandfather's house in Bom Socorro,
where my father was born
and where I was born as well.

I was the last to see the house still standing,
its intact joints were bowed,
a dwelling for bats and termites.
Until it was pulled down by the waters of many high tides,
the house had drowned
in a silence made of slime and leaves and tiles.

But the house did not die for good
when the beams of memory tumbled down
in my father's mind,
in this, the summer of his ninetieth year.
For more than half a century,
without returning to the place where he was born,
the house remained standing in his memory,
the windows open to the mornings
of Paraná de Ramos,
the fiddlewood staircase
that he continued descending
to tread the dewy *capim* grass
and to walk with a run in his step
through the common fields covered in silk-cotton trees
all the way to the flowery banks of Lago Grande
where adolescent hands learned
the secrets of cow udders.

Wherever he went, my father took along the house
and the hammock stretched between ariquara trees,
where, cradles in the mosquito silence,
he and my mother embraced,
cloaked by an overpowering sky
full of stars.

One night, the two of us alone,
in a silence almost impossible today
in the present-day pine from Manaus,
my father asked me if I remembered
a jungle sound that he heard
in the clear early morning, his arrival
from Bom Socorro burning in his memory,
after much rowing and so many waters.
I replied with silence. I stood listening
to my father making his way amidst the mango trees
toward that thud, that
dry, steely thud, that singing
steel on wood -it was your mother,
her hair flowing in the sun, it was Maria,
brandishing her ax and splitting logs
into a blue mulatto wood, as hard as bronze;
buffeted by the wind, she stood alone
in the middle of the jungle.

All those things resurfaced
and suddenly came together in the memory,
while the tumbledown house was given
to ravenous abandonment, prickly weeds,
and the old disillusioned gum-tree
yielded its fruit to the accompaniment of monkeys' cried
and parrots reveling in the sun.

Meanwhile my lonesome grandmother Safira,
the house's last true inhabitant,
would wake in the dawn to wait for
a canoe that would never return.
Safira, the rock of the waters,
who gave me her blessing like
one who drops the hook to snare
a *jaraqui* fish amidst the paronga plants,
always dressed in black,
her gravelly voice hiding
the tenderness of stars
at dawn over Andirá.

Son of the jungle, water and wood,
I returned to help build
our future home. Race of pith,
one day the luminous prows will arrive
to free all green from slavery.

TEMO POR MEUS OLHOS

Temo por meus olhos
diante das puras vestes.
E no entretanto, desejo.

Temor que sugere o epílogo
de ser cântaro partido
ao lado de fonte pródiga.

A não contemplar, prefiro
definitiva cegueira.

Não como os homens cegos,
mas como os pés das crianças
que são cegos, caminhando.

I FEAR FOR MY EYES

I fear for my eyes
faced with honorable vestments.
Meanwhile, I wish.

Fear that suggests the aftermath
to being a broken pitcher
at the prodigial well.

To not contemplating, I prefer
eternal blindness.

Not like blind men,
but like the feet of children,
which, when walking, too are blind.

RUMO

A Geir Campos

Somente sou quando em verso.

Minhas faces mais diversas
são labirintos antigos
que me confundem e perdem.

Meu pensamento perfura
muros de nada, à procura
do que não fui nem serei.

Ante a carne fêmea e branca
meu corpo se recompõe
ofertando o que não sou.

Meu caminhar e meus gestos
mal e apenas anunciam
minha ainda permanência.

Para chegar até onde
não me presumo, mas sou,
sigo em forma de palavra.

BEARINGS

I only am in verse.

My most diverse *persona*
are ancient labyrinths
that confound and lose me.

My thought bores
through walls of nothingness, in search
of who I never was nor will be.

Faced with pale female flesh
my body resurrects,
to volunteer what I am not.

My walk, my gestures
ill-proclaim, if at all they do,
my yet-unshaken permanence.

To reach where
I do not try to be, but *am*,
I go on shaped like a word.

Remaining poems translated by R. Kelly Washbourne

This is the river that Vincente Pinzón saw in 1500, without knowing that he had left the Atlantic behind and was entering the mouth of a fresh water ocean. Santa Maria of the Fresh Water Sea. This was the Amazon torn open by the keels of the first caravels. The "Big Water" of the Indians who lived along its banks.

There were many names:
Fresh Water Sea,
Orellana's river,
Marañon,
to the Arawaks, it was the Guieni,
the Parauaçu of the Tupis,
river of Amazonas,
the Big River of the Amazon,
the Amazon River, that stretches more than six thousand kilometers, from the fine thread of water that comes down from Lake Lauri, Lauricocha, high up in the Andes, descends also from Vilcanota, gathers volume in the Urubamba, picks up silt in the Ucayali, grows stronger through the cascades of the Solimões in the Peruvian jungle, settles into its main course as it enters Brazil, still going by the same name, grabbing trees all along until it meets the Rio Negro in a strange area where the clay-colored water of one river refuses to mix with the black water of the other. But it is here that it becomes the Amazon, properly speaking, impetuously hurtling through the Strait of Breves to meet the Atlantic, pushing the ocean water out to sea for enormous distances.

To be sure, the sea takes its revenge. Gathering together all its saline strength, it rebounds in a fury with waves many meters high raging against the river water, tearing away at the shoreline, sinking ships as well as riverboats.

The law of the river never stops imposing itself on the life of its people. Water becomes empire. Water that recharges from the course of its own flow, water that carries and caresses, water that uproots, water that sings, water that drops off into waterfalls, spins into whirlpools, water that keeps on flowing even when it's low, suddenly surging again when the wind is behind it, swirling, wanting to fly, still and silent water of the Igapó flood plain. Water tremendously deep, more than a hundred fathoms deep, a silent abyss where the gigantic *piraiba* fish move about blindly. Narrow tributaries, like the one at Pucu, with their secret curves and bends that have seen me so often, that never dry up even during low ebb, never reveal their deep beds. Water, shallow, transparent, water shallow and cloudy, a scattering of light in the early morning. Water placid as a lake, rolling water of the river's headwaters. Still water: Lake Marcelo, there behind the small branch of the Paraná-Eve — when the *uirapuro* sings, the whole forest falls silent, the other birds stop singing and the waters stop, listening, from time to time the river's skin quivers. Water filled with white *capim* grass from one bank to the other, water thick with marsh grass, people walk on top of the matted vegetation. Water of disease: water of dysentery, water of yellow fever. But also water of the cacimba pool; in the sultriness of the rain forest, the vast underground network of cold springs. Turbid water of the Solimões, the Madeira, the Juruá, the Purus. The blue water of the Tocantins, the green water of the Tapajós, the Xingu. The variegated blackness of the river Andirá.

This is the Amazon with its cycles. Time of the "first waters" when the river shows signs of wanting to grow. Flood season, low water season. Regimen of the waters conditioning and transforming the lives of the Amazon people through all the stages of the year. Everywhere along the Amazon. Not only deep in the forest interior but along the river banks, and in the cities and principal centers of the region, people undergo both the adverse and generous effects of the river's rise and fall. Where they live, in what they eat, in their daily work. The cycles of the river are a constant to be reckoned with. For they are also economic cycles. Low water signifies abundant crops: the flood plain inundated and fertilized as the river adds mineral salts and organic material. A time of great fishing and a good time for planting. High water means calamity and misery: the fish take refuge in the backwaters, arriving there by feeder streams, the plantings are destroyed, livestock must be taken to high ground or else quickly rounded up in the *maromba*, emergency corrals built with slats on supports above water level, the *sucuriju* anaconda lying in wait; the floors of the houses submerged, snakes attracted by the scents of domestic animals. People at the mercy of the river, but they don't give up hope: they wait for the water to go down and for the floors of their houses to reemerge, and they take advantage of the earth once again enriched by the flood. The river tells the people what to do. And they follow the river's orders. If they don't, they've had it. . . .

translated by Charles Cutler

A Tribute by Nicomedes Suárez-Araúz

ELEGIA DE ALBA

Fragmento

A Thiago de Mello

I

Cuando te desnudas, luz en la selva,
tumbas tu sombra al río
y tu primer hijo te brota
como un cervatillo.

Amazonas, de cabellera acuática
y piel lacerada,
todos los recodos mueren
en tus carnes invértebras.

Hace ya siglos, cuando los conquistadores
plantaron la oscuridad,
recogieron la sombra blanca del alba
y te cercenaron el pecho.

II

La lluvia de Manaus, Brazil,
es la lluvia de Riberalta, Bolivia,
es la lluvia de Santa Ana, mi pueblo,
es la lluvia de Iquitos, Perú,
es la lluvia de Leticia, Colombia.

Hilos de agua que caen sobre el polvo,
juntos, agua y tierra,
arcilla somos para ya no separamos jamás,
y no hay distancia entre nosotros
y los grandes árboles
que mueren en la noche.

ELEGY OF DAWN

Fragment

For Thiago de Mello

I

When you undress, light in the jungle,
your shadow tumbles into the river
and your first offspring springs forth
like a deer's foal.

Amazon, water mane
and pierced skin,
all your twists and turns die
in your invertebrate flesh.

Five centuries ago, when Conquistadors
planted darkness
they gathered the white shadow of dawn
and hacked off your breast.

II

The rain of Manaus, Brazil,
is the rain of Riberalta, Bolivia,
is the rain of Santa Ana, my hometown,
is the rain of Iquitos, Peru,
is the rain of Leticia, Colombia.

Threads of water falling on the dust,
blended, water and soil,
we are forever clay never to grow apart
again, with no distance
between us and the large trees
that die in the night.

SEMILLAS AMAZONICAS

Quizás un día,
hacia el fin de lo tangible,
hablemos con nuestras bocas
soldadas en las semillas
de una fuente de sol.

Y nos irimos disecando
hasta ser sólo semillas,
esperando bajo tierra
el nuevo fulgor del verde
en nuestro centro.

Río Mamoré, septiembre de 1966

AMAZONIAN SEEDS

Perhaps one day,
towards the end of tangible things,
we'll speak with our mouths
soldered in the seeds
of a fountain of sun.

Thus we'll go on drying up
until we are only seeds
awaiting beneath the earth
the new glow of green
within our center.

Mamoré River, September 1966

poems translated by José Manuel Rodeiro

Tribute Compiled & Edited by Amanda J. Austin

AMAZONIAN LITERARY REVIEW

A JOURNAL DEDICATED TO THE LITERARY TRADITIONS OF
THE COUNTRIES OF THE AMAZONIAN BASIN

Presenting and defining the syncretic literary traditions from Amazonia.
Includes poems and stories in translation, reviews of new works by
Amazonian writers, essays on Amazonian literary identities,
and essays on the historical context of its literature.

Editors Nicomedes Suárez-Araúz & Charles Cutler

Layout Amanda J. Austin

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Secretaria de Estado
de Cultura e
Economia Criativa

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